There is a little story that has supposedly come to us through centuries of Christian tradition. / Jesus had returned to Heaven after his life on earth. He told of the joys and sorrows, the good friends, the suffering; he told of his trial and curcifixion. He ended by describing the little band of disciples that he had left behind to carry on., To him came the question, ("Do you think they will succeed?") They will succeed" was Jesus' calm assurance. "But what provision has been made if they fail?" was the persistent question. The reply "I have made no other provision; they will not fail."

"They will not fail" To whom was Jesus referring? Obviously to the circle of disciples; to those whose work and commitment, and loyalty gave birth to the Christian Churh. / That there is a church, that the Gospel of Jeus Christ has been carried to every corner of the world is evidence that they did not fail. / But neither is their success the end of the story. / From the days of the apostles, down through 2,000 years of history men have been the heirs of Christ's confidence. Today, Nov. 11, 1962, we in this bulding are the heirs of that tradition and calling. Our task, like that of Peter, James, John is very simply to continue that which JexusChrist, the Son of God began. / With this thought in mind I wish to examine the contemporary church, and our church; to see where it has or has not lived up to the expectations of its Lord; to stop and eaxamine some of the more serious problems facing it.

Our scripture lesson this morning included the well known statement to Peter concerning the church. ("You are Peter and on this Rock I will build my church; and the powers of death will not prevail against it.") For 15 centuries the Roman Catholic Church has defended the Papacy with this statement; claiming that Peter here became Christ's first vicar on earth and that the Bishop of Rome shares the powers here given him.

To the second critique we must give a more careful reply. Few if any people would assert that when Jesus used the word translated church he visualized the church as it has evolved over the centuries. What we must do is discover what he did mean when he used the word and that sends us back to the word ἐκκλησία. It did not mean church as we use that term. From the pages of Israelite history God had dealt with man in community. Throughout the Old Testament we read the word congregation, nation, people. God called a group of people together and with them he established a covenant. The community involved was called the "people of God." To translate literally, this phrase--people of God--would be a better rendering of ἐκκλησία, for this O.T. tradition is surely what Jesus had in mind. His followers would become a new community; a new israel, involved in a new Covenant. That he had this in mind there can be no doubt. He clearly commissioned his disciples to go into all the world preaching and teaching, healing and guiding; i.e. they were to continue the work of redempt. to be a part this ἐκκλησία, there was no option.

The first problem of the contemporary church has its roots, or rather its solution, right here. We are not so much involved in a debate whether there ought to be ac church or not. But we are the victims of a Protestant retreat from this passage, and from any firm doctrine of the church. That the church is necessary to Christianity is simply a statement we don't like to make. Because we all know too many people who call themselves Christians, and who feel that the church doesn't have to enter the picture.

To clarify the issue we must again take a cursory look at Church history. Christ's diciples knew what they were to do. They preached and healed and proclaimed the presence of the Kingdom of God. And as a result of their efforts Christian communities sprang up throughout the then known world. Bishops became necessary as the young church grew; and very naturally

The answers to these questions must be in terms personal commitment to Jesus Christ. I have been using the word Church in a general manner; but now let's bring it close to home and see that we, you and I, are the church; that everything said for or against the church applies directly to us in a very personal way. For we, by being here, are claiming to be Christians. We are claiming for ourselves the mission as it was given to Peter, James, John and Paul.

Arthur McKay writing an article on stewardship for Presbyterian Life quotes the well known hymn:

"Take thou ourselves O Lord, Heart Mind and Will,
Through our surrendered souls Thy Plan Fulfill.

We yield ourselves to Thee, Time, Talent, all;
We hear and henceforth heed--to
Thy sovereign call."

Then he describes what seems to be the typical church member's response. ("Look God, we don't mean that literally. We can give some praise to Thee, if there is nothing more directly related to our interests that we must do. We can spend our occassional hour (mind you we don't mean an hour and twenty minutes) in worship from time to time but it isn't always convenient. We do spend a moment here and there in prayer if we've tried everything else, the things in which we secretly have confidence, and they've failed. But God, what we are really looking for is some kind of bargain basement religion. What we'd really like to do, but a certain churchly modesty forbids us to say it, is this; We'd like to accept the unconditional offer of love that we see in Jesus Christ, we're willing to receive as much as you can give; but God, we just don't have time to match your faithfulness with our own. We're looking for religion at a discount.")

This is heady sarcasm, but it is to the point. Christianity means a personal devotion to Jesus Christ that is willing to sacrifice. When the church has lost sight of this it has ceased to be a church; and when Christian men retreat from sacrificial commitment they cease to be Christian men.

This afternoon visitors from the church will call in every home. They will, to the best of their abilities, confront you with the ways in which this church, as a part of Christ's body, intends to go about continuing his work. They will ask you to sign a reaffirmation of faith. It reads "I hereby reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and recommit myself to his will as it is carried out by His Holy church and by the 1st UPC. I promise, to myself and God, that I will truly attempt to make my church a more effective instrument of my Lord's will." I ask you to read it and think about it for this is the hinge of Christianity. Ask yourself, do I mean it when I call Jesus Christ my Lord? Do I really mean to recommit myself to His Will and his church? You will be asked then to pledge time and money to the church. This is not something different from the first step. There are no separate categories of religion and economics in the Church of Jesus Christ. The personal affirmation of faith--means service and sacrifice. Without them it cannot be called a true affirmation. It is an act of personal devotion which we seek today. We cannot all be missionaries, we can't even suffer physically for our faith--but we can make a concrete experssion of our commitment in our pledge to the Church.

Christianity is not easy and undemanding. But neither is it distressing and painful. The unanimous testimony of men from the Apostle Paul until today is that the Christian faith is a joyful, life giving experience. But it does not come automatically. God does not decend upon us and prompt us suddenly to the heights of religious ecstasy. On the contrary one becomes a Christian partly by the Grace of God and partly by an act of will. We are naive if we expect Christianity to be meaninhful if we have never given of ourselves. There are no short cuts to Christianity --you must take a step in faith, leaning on God's presence and guidance. How else can we explain the behavior of the